

THE RAP SHEET: A FANZINE FOR PELGRANE PRESS' GUMSHOE™ ROLEPLAYING SYSTEM

VOLUME ONE, ISSUE THREE, AUGUST 2009

OH MY GOODNESS we've actually made it to Issue 3! Now, if you're surprised by this fact, trust me, we are equally astonished! But then again, maybe we shouldn't be...

As most of you reading this broadsheet are probably aware, the *Gumshoe* game system is really little more than a framework within which to play roleplaying games that focus on investigation and acquisition of clues. Robin and Ken (with more than a little help from others I'm sure) have created a mechanically light game that is easily expanded and developed with little affect on the core system. There is a certain appeal to this approach, and it is one that makes creating additional material extremely easy (and enjoyable).

In fact, the first article in this issue, *False Prophets: Gumshoe: Beyond the Hype*, examines the topic of what the *Gumshoe* system truly achieves and how better to translate this to players and Game Masters alike.

To follow this up we present *Medic!* an article taking another look at the First Aid rules in *Gumshoe*.

As always, If you have sometime to say about this issue (or the zine in general), we can be contacted via email at - attherapsheet@gmail.com

The Team at the Rap Sheet

WHAT IS THE GUMSHOE SYSTEM?

The *Gumshoe* system is a new way of looking at investigative roleplaying. The mechanics inherent in *Gumshoe* games offers a simple and intuitive method of writing, running and playing mystery scenarios. It ensures fast-flowing play that always gives you the informational puzzle pieces you need to propel your latest case toward its exciting final revelations.

Currently this system runs many different games, all published by Pelgrane Press. These include: *The Esoterrorists*, *Fear Itself*, *Trail of Cthulhu* and *Mutant City Blues*.

For more information on any of these games, and future releases, see - www.pelgrane.com

FALSE PROPHETS: GUMSHOE BEYOND THE HYPE

In this essay, we examine the paradigm of the Gumshoe system; from the rumour, opinion and hearsay that has followed it since its inception, and what you can do to get the most out of it. Of course, as always, this essay reflects only the author's opinion, based on their personal observations and thoughts.

LIKE MOST OTHER GAMERS, I first heard of the *Gumshoe* system through the gossip and hype around its very first release - *The Esoterrorists*. These initial reports - like most that followed them - focused on the perceived issues around the failure of some game systems to mechanically mitigate situations where a failed skill roll results in the breakdown of an adventure. We've all heard this before - how an investigative plot begins to have collapse when vital clues are missed. Hell, I've even experienced it before, when my players failed to directly ask about the watermark in a letter they had found and I (for some idiotic reason) forced them to rehash their steps in the vain hope of finding this missing clue (much to their obvious annoyance).

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But to many, including myself (who I hope has grown and developed as a Game Master since the debacle I mentioned above), this was a silly, if not inane, reason to create yet another roleplaying game. Games don't stall because of failures to find clues; they fail because the Game Master and their players don't communicate (in any number of ways). Suffice to say, I wasn't really short listing *The Esoterrorists* for my Santa Stocking.

Even when I discovered a copy in a second-hand bookshop I was a little reticent to purchase. Still, I was (and still am) a great fan of Call of Cthulhu and the premise of *The Esoterrorists* alone was enough to get me to shell out the cash for it. Of course, on first glance the book did little to dispel my initial opinions, and soon, driven by interest in the setting, was looking to modify the mechanics to better suit my sensibilities, although to little success.

And then I got it.

It came to me in a flash really, despite what I'd seen Robin post on various forums up to that time. It had been staring me in the face the whole time, but somehow I just hadn't 'got it'. You see, what I realised was that *Gumshoe* wasn't simply about making sure you got the clue - that was just the hype. *Gumshoe* was about how to run a game that reflected all those investigative dramas we've come to love and hate; how to empower the players (and by extension their characters) to focus on "what the clues really mean", or how they should be interpreted. Once I understood that everything about the games became so much easier to comprehend.

Almost immediately I gave up trying to make radical changes the system; the mechanics in *Gumshoe* are intentionally light - yet another tool in ensuring the focus remains on play. Instead, I started to look how I could capitalise on the tool-kit it presented, and how I could create the best investigative games possible when using it.

UPON REFLECTION

It has been almost a year since I was 'enlightened', and over this period I've formed a few more opinions on it. It's likely that you too have come to these conclusions, but I think they are worth mentioning.

First, *Gumshoe* is designed to enable one type of game only - Investigation. That's not to say that it can't stretch its wings to include other gaming genres (as *Mutant City Blues* amply highlights), but its roots are in clue gathering and analysis. As such, I certainly don't expect the Pelgrane team to be publishing a tactical combat game using the *Gumshoe* system any time soon.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

It would be easy for me to just leave this article here, by simply stating that '*Hey I got it wrong, Gumshoe is more than just always finding the clues*'. But that wouldn't solve the issues some gamers have discovered when playing or running a *Gumshoe* game for the first time.

Thankfully, there are a number of relatively simple things players and the Game Master can do to get the best out of this system, and I've listed a few of these below. This is by no means a comprehensive list, but should at least be a start to those struggling to come to terms with some of the game's concepts

- **Training the players** - *Gumshoe* games have their own 'language', and it is important that the players are aware of this prior to playing.

As investigation is the focus of the system, players should learn to posit all their investigative questions in a way that reflects not only their desired action, but the Ability they are attempting to use to achieve it. For example, a player shouldn't simply say "*I ask the perp about where he was on the night in question*", but rather "*I use my Intimidation ability to lean on the prep. I crack my knuckles and ask him where he was in a low, deliberate tone; making sure he knows well and good the reward he will get for withholding any little detail*".

Not only does this encourage roleplaying, but it also allows for the Game Master to interpret when and how clues can be revealed. From experience, I've noticed that this can be quite a paradigm shift for some gamers, but in the end, even the most stubborn come around!

- **Physical leads** - Handouts and clues have traditionally been part of many roleplaying games. By providing your group handouts and tangible clues you immediately empower the players to interpretation of the evidence as they see it fitting the plot. Not only does this add to the atmosphere of the game, but as the players are making their own conclusions based on the evidence any issues around 'railroading' of scenarios is minimised.

- **The No-spend Method** - In *Mutant City Blues* (see page 88), Robin Laws introduces a method enabling characters to seamlessly gain information based on their Abilities in a way that eliminates the need for the players to mark-off Ability points. Although this method does require more paperwork on the behalf of the Game Master, the rewards are plentiful.

Second, as the game grows, it starts to fit better in its niche. On reflection, *The Esoterrorists* was too 'light' a product in my opinion, to really hit home on the key aspects of the system. As further releases have made their way to market, the focus of mechanics, and more importantly, how to use them, has been better highlighted. The most recent game, *Mutant City Blues* captures this perfectly, with information on procedure and process used to reinforce the way in which the game should be used.

Third, and finally, when you look at the current evolution of roleplaying (with the rise of the so called 'Indie' or 'Story' games), *Gumshoe* encompasses the best of both worlds. I say this as most of these more recent games look to highlight the use of mechanics to reinforce gameplay - exactly as *Gumshoe* does. However, at least from my stand point, many of these games also sacrifice flexibility and (dare I say it) 'fun' in exchange for structure. *Gumshoe* doesn't do that, instead it tries to open up the game so that action outside its core function is easy and simple to achieve. I've used the words 'tool-kit' in this article previously, and that - to me at least - is the true strength of this game system. The ease and simplicity of the mechanics makes expanding particular sub-system straightforward, encouraging, I hope, yet further settings and genres to explore.

NIGHT CREATURES

I've recently been working on a new setting for the *Gumshoe* system, one that I may look to release through this fanzine, or my own blog site.

Called *Night Creatures*, it focuses on members of the Victorian High Society as they struggle against the machinations of the Vampyr - hellish creatures who are slowly infiltrating the upper classes of Britain.

However, rather than simply hunting vampires or investigating Cthulhu-like entities, *Night Creatures* will let the characters determine how the Vampyr has come to Britain, and why they intend to infiltrate society. This added to the ever-growing class struggle facing the nation allows for a setting that is dynamic and chilling in the same breath.

Night Creatures is loosely based on the *Trail of Cthulhu* version of the *Gumshoe* rules and will require a copy of that book to be run properly.

the medic might expend), it does somewhat jar with the other, mainly consistent, mechanics presented in *Gumshoe*.

As an alternative to this spend mechanic, the following rules utilise the *Difficulty Number* and *Difference* rolled on a Test to see how successful the first aid attempt was.

THE ROLL

When attempting to restore a character's Health, the First Aider should roll their d6 (and add any Medic General Ability points they wish to spend) and attempt to equal or exceed the following Difficulty Numbers.

If the injured character is currently:

- **Wounded** (has a positive Health Pool), then the Difficulty Number is 2.
- **Hurt** (have a Health Pool anywhere from zero to -5), then the Difficulty Number is 4.
- **Seriously Wounded** (have a Health Pool anywhere from -6 to -11), then the Difficulty Number is 6.

This number can be modified, of course, by the location and situation in which the test is undertaken (for example, a Medic test in a hospital is worth at least a reduction of 2 points from the Difficulty Number, while trying to stabilise a seriously wounded companion during a jungle firefight might increase the Difficulty Number by 2).

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THE RESULT

Any roll failing to match the Difficulty Number fails to heal the victim. However, any roll that equals or exceeds the Difficult Number successfully heals the character. This extent of this healing is based both on the level of injury the character currently has, and the *Difference* between the Difficulty Number and the total rolled.

If the injury was:

- **Wounded** (has a positive Health Pool), then for every point of *difference* the injured character regains 2 Health points.
- **Hurt** (have a Health Pool anywhere from zero to -5), then for every point of *difference* the injured character regains 1 Health point.
- **Seriously Wounded** (have a Health Pool anywhere from -6 to -11), then any successful roll stabilises the victim (with any two points of *difference* allowing the injured character to regain 1 Health point).

As a general rules, Health points received from a Medic test cannot exceed the character's starting Health Pool, while each injury can only be treated once (with the exception of tests against Serious Wounds which can be attempted once per character with points in the Medic General Ability).

NATURAL HEALING

Characters who have been injured will slowly recover Health points. The speed at which these return is based on the circumstance surrounding the character's convalesce.

Wounded and **Hurt** characters regain:

- 3 Health points for every day spent in hospital or under specialised medical care.
- 2 Health points for every day spent resting (i.e. at home or under non-specialised care, family, friends, etc.)
- 1 Health point if continuing to undertake full activity (i.e. maintaining an investigation, etc.)

Seriously Wounded characters regain:

- 1 Health point for every day spent in hospital or under specialised medical care.
- 1 Health point for every two days spent recovering elsewhere.

FINAL COMMENTS

As can be seen this approach to the Medic General ability allows for a more consistent mechanic that rewards characters specialising in first aid and emergency treatment. I hope also that it provides some guidelines to how guide a character as they recover from injury and damage.

These rules have worked well for my group and I in recent sessions and I'd be most interested in hearing from you if you attempt to uses them in your *Gumshoe* games. Please contact me at attherapsheet@gmail.com with any feedback or comments you might have.